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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1996-1997

Letter dated 9 May 1996 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to the Chairman of the Fifth Committee

Following the issuance of the Secretary-General's report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 (A/C.5/50/57), the Bureau of the Committee on Conferences agreed that it was the responsibility of the Committee to examine the impact of that report on Conference Services. Subsequently, at its 388th meeting, on 30 April 1996, the Committee considered the Secretary-General's report.

In informing the Committee of the impact of the proposals, the Secretariat indicated that programme managers had been instructed to achieve savings of a certain order of magnitude ($26.75 million) and to attain a vacancy rate of 6.4 per cent. That had involved a major exercise for Conference Services, which kept its core staff at a lower level than necessary to cover requirements and relied heavily on temporary assistance. In order to achieve the required targets, it was necessary to reduce temporary assistance, increase the use of self-revision and postpone the purchase of computerized systems for use in the Translation Services as well as other technological innovations, thereby deferring anticipated productivity gains. Even after taking into account the capacity expected to be released by the cancellation of scheduled meetings, available resources would be sufficient to service only those meetings approved in the calendar of conferences, and no additional meetings requested by any intergovernmental organ could be accommodated without additional resources. Document-processing capacity would also be reduced, in which connection priority would be given to parliamentary documentation, rather than meeting records and publications.

The Committee expressed its concern at the impact of these measures on the capacity of Conference Services to meet mandated activities, in terms of both servicing meetings and processing documentation. In particular it stressed that

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the concurrence of the body concerned must be sought before any action was taken to alter entitlements to meetings; that increased reliance on self-revision should not impair translation quality; and that all official languages must receive equal treatment. The Committee also noted that the deferral of technological innovations, including the modernization of the text-processing services at the United Nations Office at Vienna, would be counterproductive in terms of cost-effectiveness. More information on the impact of the measures must be provided to enable the General Assembly to take an informed decision.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter circulated to the members of the Fifth Committee to apprise them of the views of the Committee on Conferences.

(Signed) El Hassane ZAHID
Chairman
Committee on Conferences